Having a faith conversation with old and new friends is as easy as setting the table.
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The FAITH FEEDS program is designed for individuals who are hungry for opportunities to talk about their faith with others who share it. Participants gather over coffee or a potluck lunch or dinner, and a host facilitates conversation using the C21 Center’s biannual magazine, C21 Resources.

The FAITH FEEDS GUIDE offers easy, step-by-step instructions for planning, as well as materials to guide the conversation. It’s as simple as deciding to host the gathering wherever your community is found and spreading the word.

All selected articles have been taken from material produced by the C21 Center.
CONVERSATION STARTERS

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”
—Rom 15:13

Here are three articles to guide your FAITH FEEDS conversation. We suggest that you select two that will work best for your group, and if time permits, add in a third. In addition to the original article, you will find a relevant quotation, summary, and suggested questions for discussion. We offer these as tools for your use, but feel free to go where the Holy Spirit leads.

This guide’s theme is: Hope
FLOWERING IN THE BURREN

By Colleen M. Griffith

From C21 Resources Fall 2013

There is a well-known and beautiful spot in County Clare, Ireland, known as the Burren. Occupying an area of some 135 square miles, it is a bleak and stony place. The exposed limestone of the Burren stretches for miles with no visible topsoil, presenting a flat but jagged surface. In the Burren, rainwater penetrates lines of weakness in the limestone, and gradually vertical cracks, known as grikes, form in the rocks. Ironically, these cracks in the rocks give rise to some rare and amazing wildflowers. A variety of unusual alpine and Mediterranean plants are apparent, growing from the spaces between the rocks.

The Burren in County Clare proved to be a big surprise to archeologists, botanists, and ecologists. I suspect that our present ecclesial time will prove a surprise as well. There is, after all, much that is flourishing in our “grikes,” the cracks in the rocks of a bleak-looking ecclesial landscape. Our unmistakable sign of rich flowering remains the prophetic witness of Catholic women, who in their prayers, praxis, and theological work remain committed to the vision of a Catholic Church at its best. The results of this commitment may seem incremental, but the prophetic power of such a stance cannot be missed.

The decision made by women to believe in and act out of hope for a future Church now is a decision made not for themselves alone. It is a stance taken for the sake of thousands of other women and men, one that serves as an inspiration in the present and becomes an important lead for those yet to come. It is a time to recognize the richness of our own Burren landscape, to find hope and enjoyment in the flowers growing in our grikes.

Colleen M. Griffith is an associate professor of the practice of theology and director of spirituality studies at Boston College’s School of Theology and Ministry.
FLOWERING IN THE BURREN

“The one who has hope lives differently…”
—Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI

Summary
Theologian Colleen Griffith draws a parallel between the Christian virtue of hope and a phenomenon in nature. Hope, she claims, must be found in some of the most difficult places and spaces, just like wildflowers grow in unlikely and unwelcoming landscapes. For Griffith, hope can also spring up in the Church’s most difficult periods as it must during life’s most challenging times.

Questions for Conversation
1. The Church has been through many difficult periods, including two recent iterations of a crisis of abuse and a crisis of leadership. Do you have hope that the Church can heal, recover, and restore justice? Why or why not?
2. Griffith localizes her hope in the women working tirelessly for the Gospel. What figures in the Church, including your local parish, give you hope and strengthen your belief in the Good News?
3. Thinking back on your own life and its many chapters, where have you found hope, especially in the most difficult circumstances? Why did you need it and where did you find it?
Adapted from Father Michael Himes’ Agape Latte talk given on September 24, 2019.

I’m thinking about something else now about hope that I wasn’t going to talk about. But I think I will. And that is you undoubtedly are watching this arm shake like this at the moment. That’s because there’s something wrong, in the connection somewhere up here in my brain, and I’m at the end of my dosage. I have to take a new dose of pills. And then it will gradually subside.

I remember when this started. Let me tell you the story of how it started. It started because I was at the dentist. I went to the dentist and I had cracked a tooth. It was a filling that went back to when I was a boy.

The dentist said to me, “You really need to do a root canal and cap that tooth.” So I went to the oral surgeon. And he had been down in the chair, with my head all the way back so that my head was lower than any other part of my body.

And in the course of his working on the tooth, all of a sudden, just like flicking a light switch, this arm started shaking. And he got very upset, I remember. The dentist was scared to death.

And subsequently, I went to several doctors and neurologists. And they kept saying, “Oh, it’s Parkinson’s Disease.” And then I’d go on to explain how it had started. And then they’d say, “Oh, yes, that’s rather strange. That’s not the way Parkinson’s Disease usually works. It’s Parkinson’s, with anomalies.”

Well, that’s not absolutely the best way to explain something to someone.

You know, I mean, I wasn’t proud of going to bed at night saying to God, “Thank you for giving me Parkinson’s with anomalies. I’m so glad that you have. I would’ve felt terribly disappointed not to have a couple of anomalies in there.”

Well, I found a doctor who’s a very distinguished
neurologist and one of the leading experts in the United States on Parkinson's. And he looked at it and said, “It’s not Parkinson’s disease. It’s probably either a very small stroke or a very small aneurysm somewhere in the brain. For the moment, just keep living with it. If it doesn’t incapacitate you, live with it.”

Well this was in November of 1999. So I have been living with it a long time now.

What do you do with this? Well, I think what you do with it is you say “Thank you.” I mean, on the whole, having an arm that shakes is better than having an arm that doesn’t move because you’re dead. It’s allowed me access to understanding how other people feel who are faced with far more serious, far more difficult, far more painful diseases or illnesses.

This has given me a much richer sense of what people go through. And I hope that it’s made me more compassionate than I was before, were I in perfect health, and with my arm not shaking. So I live in hope that someday this will be OK. But that will be in God’s doing, not in mine.

It reminds me of a line that I’ve always loved. It’s a very simplistic line. It’s what, according to at least some of his biographers, was the last thing that Beethoven said before he died. Beethoven was quite totally deaf for at least 25 years before his death -- a great musician, of course. You can imagine what a deprivation it was for somebody with that musical talent not to be able to hear.

Well, the story is that on his deathbed Beethoven said to his friends, “I am going to be able to hear in heaven.” Well, I’d like to think that I’m going to be able to stop shaking when I’m in heaven. But it will be a gift of God, not an accomplishment of mine. It will be something one lives in hope of.

The last thing I want to say about hope is that it’s communal. You see, if I’m ever going to get rid of this shaking, it’s going to be because the whole world has changed, not just because this one place in the world changes. It’s not that out of all the creatures that exist, God has chosen to do this for Michael Himes. It’s because God has willed, for all of God’s creatures, the fullness of their being.

And in our interaction with one another, we sometimes foster that fullness of being. Sometimes we block it. Sometimes we make it more difficult for people around us. Whatever we are doing, it’s something that’s done in a community.

We don’t understand hope if we think hope is a purely personal choice or a purely personal experience. It’s not. It’s an experience that belongs to everyone. Let hope transform our lives and our world as it should.

So what I wish for you is that you have your own arm shaking sometime, in a way that you didn’t expect because that’ll help you to grow. And I offer you my deep and abiding good wishes as you think about hope for your future.

Don’t think of it as your accomplishment. Think of it as your gift. Don’t think of it as something that God demands from you. Think of it as an enormous present that is given to you.

The whole of the universe is your gift. And if at some point in the universe, it’s shaking a little bit, that doesn’t take away its grandeur, its beauty, its wonder, and its capacity for love.

Father Michael Himes is a professor of theology at Boston College.
“Pray, hope, and don’t worry.”
—Saint Padre Pio of Pietrelcina

Summary
In this excerpt from his Agape Latte talk, theologian Michael Himes discusses how he maintains the Christian virtue of hope despite a debilitating and mysterious illness. His response to his condition is to first ask God for healing, and then to accept in gratitude whatever he receives. For Himes, the Christian cannot live hope alone; it must be fostered within the community of faith.

Questions for Conversation
1. Himes describes hope not as optimism, but rather the ability to be grateful for whatever God gives to us, since we are secure in His love for us. Is this how you understand hope? What makes it different from the other theological virtues of faith and love?
2. What was a time in your life in which you needed the gift of hope? How did you cultivate or sustain it?
3. Do you agree with Himes that Christian hope can only be developed in the community of faith and in the company of the communion of saints? Who has helped you to foster hope in your own life? How have you tried to help others to keep hope in the face of challenges or difficulties?
From C21 Resources Winter 2005

In Pope John Paul II's *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, published in 1994, the Holy Father speaks of the importance of hope in the context of “crossing the threshold of the new millennium.” He indicates that these “crossings” imply a measure of difficult as well as a need for purification.

“Good” hope, to use St. Paul’s qualifying adjective, must be distinguished from the many false hopes that surround us daily and are a constant source of temptation. We hope for wealth, beauty, fame, success, and a comfortable life. But these are largely vanities. They will not furnish us with what satisfies our deepest longing. They are transitory; we are immortal.

The Holy Father reminds us that good hope—or true hope—directs us to our final goal which gives ultimate meaning and value to everything that is part of our lives. Therefore, as he goes on to say,

*In this new millennium, Christians are called to prepare for the Great Jubilee by renewing their hope in the definitive coming of the Kingdom of God, preparing for it daily in their hearts, in the Christian community to which they belong, in their particular social context, and in world history itself.*

Hope is about that which is ultimate—God—but it is not unrelated to the events that make up the substance of our lives. Indeed, hope transfigures them precisely because it relates them to their ultimate meaning. Hope is ultimate and immanent. But it is also essential, for no human being can endure its opposite—despair.

In his great poem, *The Divine Comedy*, Dante penned what may be his most celebrated line when he inscribed over the entranceway to the infernal kingdom these words: “All hope abandon, ye who enter here” (Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch’entrare). The immediate meaning, that hell is a place of absolute
finality where hope is no longer possible, is clear enough.

But there is a subtler and perhaps more important meaning that pertains not to the inhabitants of hell but to those whose final destinies have not yet been determined. This slightly veiled meaning informs people about how they can book passage to hell. For if hell is a place without hope, then by living without hope one is preparing for eternal tenancy in hell. When we live without hope, we take on the hopeless condition of hell, and at the same time make it our logical destiny. What we need, therefore, is an endless hope so that our lives do not come to a hopeless end. The fact that hope is essential to man by no means makes it easy to acquire. The hope of which John Paul writes in both Tertio Millennio Adveniente and Crossing the Threshold of Hope, also published in 1994, is something we must attain, secure, and purify through considerable difficulty.

One of the stormiest, if not the stormiest, capes in the world is the Cape of Good Hope, located near the southern tip of Africa where the powerful currents of the Atlantic and Indian Oceans converge. When Portuguese navigator Barolomeu Dias discovered this cape in 1488, he called it, fittingly, the Cape of Storms. Later King John II of Portugal renamed it “Cape of Good Hope” in anticipation of finding a sea route to India. Vasco da Gama later proved the king right when he sailed around the cape and discovered the long-sought passage to India.

In this narrative, history and symbolism come together. The hope of finding a sea route to India was eventually fulfilled because hope had been kept alive. This is the historical fact. But added to this is the symbolism that the hope was a good hope inasmuch as it was forged in a climate of difficulty. The stormy cape provided the crucible in which hope was tested and purified so that it could emerge as “good hope.”

Woody Allen once remarked that “marriage is the loss of hope.” If he meant that marriage brings about the loss of vain and unprofitable illusion, he is correct. But disillusionment is not the same as the loss of hope. We often do not grasp real hope until its imposter has been dashed by disappointment. The disillusionment that often occurs within marriage is not the death of hope if through it the couple learns to accept the lack of perfection in each other and embraces the demands of true love.

Real hope is not crushed by disappointment. In fact, it is in difficulty that hope often is born. As Chesterton said, “As long as matters are really hopeful, hope is a mere flattery or platitude; it is when everything is hopeless that hope begins to be a strength at all. Like all the Christian virtues, it is as unreasonable as it is indispensable.”

Good hope, therefore, has the qualities of realism, courage, patience, and the willingness to embrace difficulties. By contrast, what we might describe as “easy hope” lacks these virtuous qualifies and is merely a wish for better things that has the aura of vanity or fantasy.

Hope is ultimate and immanent, essential and difficult, natural and supernatural. It may well be compared, as the Pontiff states, citing St. Paul, with a mother in labor, for the mother, anticipating the birth of her child, incorporates all of these elements. The whole world is groaning under the weight of vanity. It is yearning to give birth to everlasting life and to share in the glorification of the sons of God. As the Holy Father reminds us, ours is “a time of great trial, but also of great hope.”

Donald DeMarco is an adjunct professor at Holy Apostles College & Seminary in Cromwell, CT. He is the author of many books including The Many Faces of Virtue and The Heart of Virtue.
THE VIRTUE OF HOPE

“I plead with you—never, ever give up on hope, never doubt, never tire, and never become discouraged. Be not afraid.”
—Pope Saint John Paul II

Summary

Questions for Conversation
1. The author qualifies that while we might have many desires during our lifetime, Christian hope is ultimately directed toward heaven. Do you hope for heaven? How might our everyday hopes be part of this larger desire for God?
2. DeMarco notes that in some ways, hope must be purified so that we can love more perfectly. Have you ever had an experience in which you were hoping for one thing, but learned that there was something actually better in store for you?
3. “Good hope, therefore, has the qualities of realism, courage, patience, and the willingness to embrace difficulties,” DeMarco writes. Do you agree with this assessment? What else does hope require?
GATHERING PRAYER

Be With Us Today
St. Thomas More (1478-1535)

Father in heaven,
you have given us a mind to know you,
a will to serve you,
and a heart to love you.
Be with us today in all that we do,
so that your light may shine out in our lives.
Through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

For more information about Faith Feeds, visit bc.edu/c21faithfeeds

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